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Soviets: spy case an indictment of US

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Moscow

He's the spy who came back to the cold.

And just in time to throw a further chill over next week's Geneva super-power summit meeting.

As November snow flickered through Moscow's air, Vitaly Yurchenko — the KGB "defector" who returned to the Soviet Union — resurfaced at a press conference Thursday to elaborate upon his tale of kidnapping and captivity by the US Central Intelligence Agency.

Kremlin spokesman Vladimir Lomeiko, sitting by Mr. Yurchenko's side, charged that the United States, by engaging in such forms of "state terrorism," had forfeited its chance to criticize Soviet human rights policies.

It seemed a clear attempt to defuse the issue of Soviet human rights abuses before Mikhail Gorbachev and President Reagan meet in Geneva next week.

To underscore the point, Yurchenko's press conference was broadcast over Soviet television. His account, given in a two-hour briefing, led some observers to speculate that Yurchenko may well have been a double agent from the start.

The "captivity" that Yurchenko described was odd indeed. He said he had played rounds of golf with his CIA captors, who coached him on how to improve his swing, and that he had dined with his CIA guards at restaurants and always had "rolls" of cash to pay the bills. He gained enough weight, he said, to have trouble fitting his clothes.

Yet he also described a trip to a private Washington medical clinic, arranged by the CIA because it worried about his loss of weight while in captivity.

Alternately fidgety and rambling, glib and emotional, Yurchenko's account seemed worthy of a spy thriller. In Moscow, the US Embassy refused to comment on it. But privately, Western diplomats were openly skeptical of Yurchenko's convoluted story.

Yurchenko denied any connection with the Soviet secret police, the KGB, describing himself as a "counsellor" with the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs who specialized in security of embassy buildings. He also denied that romantic entanglements had motivated him to defect or spurred his return to his "motherland."

A high-ranking Soviet physician, Nikolai Zharikov, flanked Yurchenko. He said that any apparent nervousness or lapses in Yurchenko's story were undoubtedly the after-effects of the "psychotropic" drugs that the CIA had administered to him.

Thus fortified by expert medical testimony, Yurchenko repeated his story of how he was abducted in Rome and awoke in a US hospital. Later, he said, and he was moved to a villa in suburban Virginia ringed with guards and security devices, where he was held a virtual prisoner.

What followed, he said, were nearly three months of drug-induced stupor, during which CIA agents tried to convince him that he had voluntarily defected.

The CIA, he added, had warned him that should he try to go back to the Soviet Union, "what awaits you is Siberia and handcuffs." Instead, he said he found a family overjoyed at his return. But he said he would never meet the press again, and planned to change his appearance so that he would not be recognized in public.

He began plotting his escape from the first day of captivity, he said. His repeated appeals to meet with Soviet diplomats in the US, he added, went unheeded.

Yurchenko explained that he was able to cajole a second-year novice, named Tom Hanna, into a shopping excursion in Manassas, Va., unaccompanied by the usual retinue of henchmen. At a mall there, Yurchenko said he purchased a hat and secreted it in his raincoat. And he said he managed to make a call to the Soviet Embassy in Washington and plead for help. (It was "amazing," he said, that he had been able to recall the phone number despite the influence of the drugs and the five years that had elapsed since he had been stationed in Washington.)

Mr. Hanna then agreed to a spur-of-the-moment trip to a French restaurant in Washington which, coincidentally, was situated near the Soviet Embassy. Yurchenko said that when Hanna excused himself to wash his hands, he fled. Donning his hat and pulling up his collar to hide his face, Yurchenko said he slipped through a cordon of CIA and Federal Bureau of Investigation agents waiting at the embassy.

He said Hanna has been "arrested" for his lapses in handling the case and will probably not be heard from again.

Thus, as the official Soviet news agency Tass put it, "a Soviet diplomat, on whose personality and mind an unprecedented attempt was made by the US CIA, has won the cruel battle."